

Who owns roads?

Simple question. Tough to answer! I'll try to give you the simplified answer. Roads come in two types: public or private.

If a road is private, it is owned by one or more citizens. You must get their permission to use the road. Private also means the owner(s) pay for maintenance.

If a road is public then it also can be two types: government owned or an open public road. Government owned means government is responsible for keeping it up. Although it may seem odd, open public roads do not carry that same charge.

Open public roads exist when the public has been using the road for ten years or more. Courts can establish public right of use although the underlying landowner has granted no rights-of-way.

Government owned roads are the most common. The federal government owns roads serving national forests, parks and dams. State governments own most of the highways between cities and towns and the Interstate highways. Cities and counties own the local roads.

Government roads normally have rights-of-way dedicated for roads and utilities. Government roads also have some type of access control. Adjacent owners must get permission from the agency road owner before they build a driveway onto the road. Private access to the Interstate and some other highways is not allowed at all. Federal and state highways almost always depend on local roads for access from private property.

Public agency road owners are responsible for maintenance. Most of the money for highways and roads comes from the user fee gasoline tax. For counties, property tax is also important.

It's often difficult to build new roads. Environmental fears and lack of money are top reasons. Crowded urban highways didn't just happen overnight. For over 30 years there has been an active deliberate effort to slow or stop road building. At the same time, auto travel demand has continued to increase. Only 4% of us will give up our car to ride the bus or train. The obvious result? Congestion, and no solution in sight.

Groups responsible for delays blame "uncontrolled growth." They advocate solutions that hinder personal mobility and auto use. We build and maintain roads because that's what people want. A solution for polluted air is clean emissions vehicles — not fewer highways. Somewhere along the way we seem to have lost our focus. Roads are an economic lifeline, not just a convenience.

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Questions about this article, or any of the series, or on other topics related to County Roads, may be directed either to your County Engineer, or to Al King, P.E., County Road Administration Board, Olympia, at Al@CRAB.Wa.Gov.